

A Fresh Look at Christmas through the Eyes of Joseph

Matt. 1:18-25

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We continue our fresh look at Christmas this morning by viewing the miracle of Christ's birth through the eyes of his father, Joseph. Matthew is the only gospel that tells his story; Luke focuses on Mary, and Mark and John don't even have birth narratives. So today's passage from Matthew is our sole source of information about Jesus' earthly father.

His story actually starts at the beginning of the first chapter of Matthew, where the gospel writer sketches a picture of Jesus' family tree in the form of a genealogy. To be true to Joseph's story we should read that genealogy, but by doing so you run the risk of losing your listeners' complete and undivided attention when you say, "and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asa, and Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, and Jehoram the father of..." You get the picture.

But the genealogy does make some important points that are significant to our exploration of Joseph today. It includes some very important people, like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Jesse and his famous son, King David. But it also includes people of little consequence, like Zerubabel and Eliakim and Sheatiel. This list of Jesus' ancestors tells us that every plan of God's runs through average Joes – and Zerubbabels – like you and me.

The genealogy concludes with another average Joe – or average Joseph. The genealogy ends with Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ. This family tree explained to the Jewish readers of Matthew's gospel one very important point: Joseph, the nondescript carpenter from Nazareth, was a descendant, not only of Abraham, but of King David.

Why was this important? Why did Matthew spend the first 16 verses of his gospel on a series of "he begat him"? That's hardly a compelling introduction. But we have to keep in mind Matthew's audience. Unlike Luke, who was writing to mostly Gentiles, Matthew was writing to a group of people with deep Jewish roots, who were intimately familiar with the Hebrew scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament), and who were acutely aware of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. So they would have known that Isaiah, in predicting the coming of the Messiah, wrote, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." Matthew was offering proof to his audience that, as Joseph's legal son, Jesus fulfills this prophecy because he is a direct descendant of both Abraham, the father of all Jews, and Jesse and his son, King David.

Joseph plays a prominent place in our modern-day versions of Christmas. You can't have a nativity without a Joseph, can you? But when you look closely at the biblical narrative, Joseph is barely present. These verses are all we have about Joseph, and if you'll notice, the man doesn't even speak! And after this mute role is finished, Joseph disappears from the gospel before Jesus is even baptized and his never heard from again.

You know in science fiction movies, when the aliens attack the good guy's spaceship, there's always some poor, nameless crew member who's only on screen long enough to get zapped into a pile of sawdust by the alien's deathray? In the credits, that

person is usually listed as something like, “Crew member #3.” That’s Joseph. In the overall picture of the birth story, Joseph hardly earns a spot at the front of the manger. He fits more appropriately behind sheep #2 or donkey #4.

But despite his wordless presence, Joseph is a key player in the drama. Just as Mary had an important decision to make about being the earthen vessel for God’s son, so Joseph is faced with a gut-wrenching decision, on which rests the fate of baby Jesus and God’s salvation plan.

At the start of our story, Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. This is more than a simple engagement, as we understand it. This is a betrothal, a year-long commitment between a man and woman that carried with it all the binding agreements of a marriage without the consummation. At the end of one year the couple was formally married.

So Joseph and Mary were in all sense committed to each other to be married. But when Mary returns from her three-month visit to her relative Elizabeth, Joseph discovers his wife is four months along in a pregnancy initiated by the Holy Spirit. How do you think Joseph reacted to that news? “Honey, the bad news is, I’m pregnant and you’re not the father. But the good news is, neither is anybody else!” We have to think that upon hearing this news, Joseph wasn’t quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

So he faces a decision, one of the most important decisions faced by anyone in the Bible: what to do with Mary and her unborn child? We are told Joseph was a righteous man, which means in Jewish tradition that he was a strict follower of God’s law. The law gave him his options. He could follow the law laid out in Deuteronomy 22, which says, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die.” So one of Joseph’s options is to expose Mary’s fornication and have her stoned to death.

By New Testament times, that punishment was rarely used. So, the only other option Joseph faced, according to the law, was divorce. No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to end the marriage contract. He could honor the shaming dictated by the law and expose Mary’s sin through a public divorce, humiliating her in front of her family and friends and leaving her future in question. Or he could divorce her quietly, with only a few witnesses, doing everything he could to keep both his and Mary’s reputation intact. Joseph is a good man and wants to do the righteous thing, but what’s the righteous thing in this case?

As Joseph wrestles with option A and option B, God presents option C. Through a dream, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife, to take her son as his own, and to give him the name Jesus, which means “God saves us.” Ignore what people tell you, ignore what the law tells you, and do what God tells you. Option C.

What should Joseph do? If he chooses God’s option, he exposes himself to the severest of ridicule. Shame was a powerful force in Joseph’s culture, and being shamed could ruin his reputation and his business. So imagine the shame he would subject himself to by walking down the street arm in arm with his wife who was carrying a child that everyone knew wasn’t his.

More important than his relationship with his townsfolk was his relationship with his family. What would he be? A Father or a stepfather? A husband or chastened roommate? If Joseph believes the angel, everything is on. The story can continue. Mary

will have a home and a family and her child will be born the son of David. But if Joseph doesn't believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes to the courthouse to file the divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever – either killed by her family or disowned by them.

For the working out of God's plan, Joseph's belief is as important as Mary's womb, because it is Joseph's decision whether or not to give this child a name that will determine the child's fate. By choosing to name the child, Joseph would exercise his right as the father and acknowledge Jesus as his legal son. Will this righteous, intensely conflicted man speak the name of Jesus? We are never told what this wordless, humble carpenter says. We are only told what he does. Despite the consequences, despite the chaos, despite the unknown future, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says this about Joseph: The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. He owns this mess, he legitimates it and gives it a name, and the mess becomes the place where new life is born.

Joseph is the one in the story most like us, presented day after day after day with circumstances beyond our control, with circumstances we would never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from the belief that God is anywhere in this mess, when an angel whispers in our ear: "Do not fear. God is here. It may not be what you had planned, but God may be born here, too, if you will permit it."

Isn't that funny, that we have some kind of say in whether God is born here? C'mon, what power do we have? The same power that Abraham had, and Isaac had, and Jehoshaphat had, and Jehoram had, and Joseph had: the power to answer "yes" to God's call and to pass on the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ. Who will save us? Who will walk beside us? Who will take the messes in our life and through them create new life? One is coming this Christmas who offers to do those things, if only we will choose to speak his name.